

Coping with PTSD After a Natural Disaster

by Dawn Wiggins, Ed.S.

Having recently experienced hurricane Irma in the Florida Keys, I have a new vantage point on PTSD and natural disasters.

I watched our community live in fear of Irma's destruction in the days leading up to her arrival. We personified her - making her a target for our painful feelings. This was one way to cope with the powerlessness.

There were tears as people packed up and said goodbye to their homes. Children were asked to select their most cherished items. Many evacuated, some stayed.

For those who stayed, we tried to enjoy ourselves while fending off criticism and concern. We knew we were taking a calculated risk.

The uncertainty of Irma's track created intense frustration. Fears were compounded by the recent images of devastation in Houston. Another struggle was the sheer size of Irma. It made it nearly impossible to evacuate within the state of Florida. The entirety of Florida was to be tormented in this cat 4/5 hurricane.

As the hurricane moved through the Keys, you could hear the intensity of the wind, the trees cracking under pressure. Many of us were in dark rooms with shutters.

Following the storm, witnessing the devastation was overwhelming. We watched loved one's sort through their damaged belongings. Water soaked piles of debris grew along neighborhood streets. The images of Keys-wide destruction tugged at our hearts. We saw our favorite people and places affected. We grieved with them.

We worked hard in the sun

and had no electricity to cool us. We felt hot and took cold showers.

These sights, sounds and experiences are important to note. They become potential triggers for trauma responses.

Each disaster has its own footprint of devastation. You don't have to lose your home or belongings to experience this type of trauma. The intense fear of the experience is enough to leave a lasting impression.

So many people had no idea what they were coming home to. This produced intense levels of anxiety for the folks who evacuated. The uncertainty associated with the potential of loss can leave a lasting impression.

It's important to know that experiencing a trauma does not mean you will develop PTSD. It is normal to have symptoms of PTSD that often resolve over time. Some folks may be more susceptible to developing PTSD. If you've experienced past traumas or have a history of mental illness or substance abuse, you are at greater risk.

Signs or symptoms that you may be experiencing PTSD

Re-experiencing the traumatic event through flashbacks or bad dreams.

Avoiding things like not allowing yourself to feel painful feelings. Or staying away from places and things that remind you of the event.

Reactivity such as angry outbursts or being easily startled.

Difficulty with your thoughts and feelings. This could look like confusion, memory problems or inappro-

priate guilt.

Young children will have different symptoms while teenagers will respond similarly to adults. Take note If your child is struggling to sleep, toilet properly or communicate their thoughts and feelings. They may also "act out" their scary feelings during play. It's important to encourage kids to talk about their experience. Help them sort out what happened while pointing out that they are safe and have support.

True PTSD must include all symptoms for a duration of 1 month.

There are things you can do to reduce the risk of developing PTSD:

Use some coping strategies. This could be any number of things like doing something fun, connecting with others, finding a warm shower, a cool room or a hot meal. It's also helpful to practice mindfulness. This is staying grounded in the moment and not dwelling on your thoughts.

Find support in your family, friends and community. The giving and receiving of help is very powerful. When we share, it helps to reduce feelings of isolation and hopelessness. Helping others can add to a feeling of purpose during a time of loss. Even if you feel like you can't do much - that's ok. The little things matter. I can't rebuild homes like my husband can, but I made sure he stayed hydrated and fed!

Talk, share and process your experience. Allow yourself to cry or express your feelings. I often encourage others to cry if they need to. Though, when I found myself overwhelmed with tears, I



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felt the urge to hide. I didn't want to be a burden. Everyone had their own intense feelings. However, when I couldn't hold it in, it felt better to be accepted and supported by people who love me.

Keep going, even when you feel afraid. When you have scary thoughts or intense feelings avoid shutting down and becoming paralyzed. It is normal to fight, fly or freeze. Try to be aware if you are reacting one of those ways. Consciously choose to do something different.

Find a way to create meaning out of your experience - like learning or finding a silver lining. The night after the hurricane, we were so hot and tired. But when we went outside to fill the generator with gas, I was awe struck with the beauty of the stars. Writing this article is also helping me create meaning from my experience.

If you are concerned about PTSD, don't hesitate to reach out. You're not crazy or broken. You just need some help making sense of your experience. A professional therapist can help.



This was the stunning view of Gilbert's Resort from the Jewfish Creek Bridge before Hurricane Irma. After Irma, the Resort made the cover of the New York Post! They are rebuilding and will reopen September 30th. Conch strong!

The Mangrove Galley by Sandi Mieszczenski

Sandi's recipes are featured here monthly.
For previous issues go to <http://www.theconchtelegraph.com>.



Finally fall is here and we have had to endure a powerful storm. Hopefully your fall will signal a return to normal. Fall to me means apple season. One of my favorite breakfasts is apple pancakes. They are so simple to make but yet very yummy. Try the recipe below and I'm sure that you will agree. Enjoy!

APPLE PANCAKES

1 box pancake mix
2 peeled and thinly sliced apples (I usually use Red Delicious apples)
1 teaspoon cinnamon
1 teaspoon vanilla extract
Pinch of nutmeg

Prepare the pancakes according to the instructions on the box and the amount of pancakes you want to cook. Add the apples and the remaining ingredients. Stir well.

Add butter to a hot skillet then cook the pancakes, again according to the instructions on the box. Serve up with your favorite syrup and a breakfast meat on the side.

